

Reformers debate rewriting Calif. Constitution



By Juliet Williams

[Associated Press](#): After a bruising effort to fix California's budget deficit that left few satisfied, political reformers are debating a novel idea to end the state's political gridlock: rewrite the state Constitution to fundamentally change how California is governed.

More than 300 people gathered to debate the idea Tuesday at a Constitutional Convention Summit. They agreed on one thing: The state's system of government is broken.

Agreement over how to fix it was more elusive.

There was no shortage of ideas: end term limits for legislators, redraw political districts to make them smaller, allow voters to register on Election Day or when they renew their driver's license, and scrap the initiative process.

"What we have is so broken that I can't even imagine that we get something worse," said Rick Jacobs, chairman of the Courage Campaign, a Los Angeles group that was among the meeting's sponsors.

"If we ever get to the point where there is a constitutional convention, I think it ought to be big, it ought to be broad, and we ought to trust people," Jacobs said.

Organized by the Bay Area Council, a business group, the summit brought together lawmakers, good-government groups and political pundits to hash out ideas about a wholesale review of California government.

Democratic Lt. Gov. John Garamendi offered possibly the boldest recommendation, a proposal to combine the two houses of the state Legislature into one body with 120 members.

"The great fight will be over do we call them senators or assembly members?" quipped Garamendi, who served two years in the Assembly and 14 in the state Senate and is now seeking the Democratic nomination for governor.

One problem is time. Trying to institute such sweeping changes could take years, and by then the immediate crisis gripping the capital could be merely a memory.

Another is the Constitution itself, which states that the only way to amend the state's governing document is through a two-thirds vote of the Legislature, which is unlikely to take such action.

Proponents of a constitutional convention want to place an initiative before California voters authorizing the review, possibly as soon as June 2010.

Then the real work would begin. Which reforms should come first? How many should be undertaken? And perhaps most important in a political world driven by money and power—who should decide?

"There'll be court battles no matter what we do," said Andrew Giacomini, an attorney with San Francisco-based Hanson Bridgett, who briefed the crowd on the potential legal pitfalls.

"We know that the party money and the union money ... will probably be against it, so there's a lot of money already going to stack up against this populist movement."

Giacomini offered another reality check: the last constitutional convention was 125 years ago.

Still, the idea has gained steam in recent months as gridlock intensified in the state Legislature over how to solve California's \$42 billion shortfall.

"We knew we touched on a nerve when we proposed it," said Jim Wunderman, chief executive of the Bay Area Council.

He cited California's overcrowded prisons, now under the supervision of a federal receiver, and its faltering school system, once among the best in the nation, as two symptoms of the failed government.

"The question is going to be, 'Is there a public movement that can be sustained behind this?'" Wunderman said.

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, a moderate Republican who has acknowledged he didn't fully grasp the power of the entrenched interests he would face until after his election in California's historic 2003 recall, has long backed many of the reforms debated Tuesday.

He led the campaign for a redistricting initiative that voters narrowly approved in November and supports an open primary system in which the top two vote-getters proceed to a runoff, regardless of party affiliation. Such a measure is to appear on the June 2010 ballot after Republican Sen. Abel Maldonado of Santa Maria won it in exchange for his vote on the state budget last week.

Schwarzenegger's spokesman, Aaron McLearn, said the governor wants to continue pursuing government reform until his term expires in January 2011.

"We'll see what comes of these meetings and summits, but he certainly would support efforts to try to reform California's system of government," McLearn said Tuesday.

Bob Stern, president of the Los Angeles-based Center for Government Reform, said powerful interests appear to be galvanizing behind the movement seeking a constitutional convention.

Reforming the current system is critical to the state's prosperity, he said.

"If California fails, I think the rest of the country should be really afraid," he said. "California leads the country in so many things."